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ABSTRACT

This study reviews the literature on the effects of television viewing on children, examines the preferences of children for television programs and commercials, and analyzes selected characteristics of these programs. A stratified sample of 1,416 students in grades 1-6 in six eastern states was polled on their viewing preferences in November of 1988. It was found that: (1) students liked prime-time family type situation comedies best; (2) while no specific commercial was picked by more than 3% of the students, commercials for soda and sugared products were selected as the favorite of 17% of the students; and (3) analyses of the children's four favorite programs indicated that smoking, drinking, and violent behavior did not usually occur on these programs. The researchers concluded that parents should limit the television viewing of their children. The text is supplemented by 13 tables, and copies of the survey instruments are provided. (35 references) (Author/EW)

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Children and Television

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to: review the literature on the effects of televiewing on children, to find which television programs and commercials children like best, and to analyze selected characteristics of these programs. The stratified sample of 1,416 students in grades 1 - 6 in six eastern states were polled concerning their preferences in November of 1988.

Findings: 1) The students liked prime-time family type situation comedies the best. 2) While no specific commercial was picked by more than three percent of the students, commercials for soda and sugared products were selected as the favorite of 17% of the students. 3) The analysis of the children's four favorite programs indicated that smoking, drinking, and violent activities did not usually occur on these programs. 4) The researchers concluded that parents should limit the televiewing of their children.

Children and Television

The average American family watched television approximately 50 hours per week in 1987 (Baker, 1987) and more importantly Liberman (1983) reports that by the time children graduate from high school they will have watched approximately 18,000 hours of television, which is more time than they will have spent in school. These statistics fuel the concerns of variety of groups and individuals, including teachers, reporters, parents, researchers, the public interest group Action for Children's Television, and the American Academy of Pediatrics. These citizens are concerned with the amount of televiewing and/or the type of behaviors exhibited by television characters, both being legitimate concerns.

This concern with content is important because the American Academy of Pediatrics (1986) believes that televiewing exposes children to too much violence, sex, drugs and alcohol. They believe that television depicts these events as risk-free and something that everyone does. In addition a Temple University survey of 2,279 children ages seven to eleven indicated that over 50% reported that they were allowed to watch television whenever they wanted, and more than 33% reported that they were allowed to watch whatever they wanted (Singer & Kelly 1984). Finally a survey by Parents magazine indicated that 60% of the subscribers felt that most television programs were not worth watching, and 72% said there was too much violence (Guller, 1987).

Numerous researchers have studied the effects of television on variables such as reading achievement, writing ability, imagination and aggressiveness. Huesmann (1984) reported that boys who strongly identify with violent television characters are more prone to aggressive behavior. Further research by Eron indicated that the amount of television violence a child views when they are 8 is the best indicator of how aggressive they will be when they are 19; in fact, televiewing at the age of eight correlates with the type of crime they might commit later on (Faivelson, 1987). Newsweek (Hackett, 1988) reported on the growing problem of kids and guns. The article pointed out that constant exposure to violence on television can desensitize children to the effect of firearms. The article also pointed out that fighting is often portrayed on television as being glamorous and often the first solution to a character's problems.

The depiction of violence is even more critical to the young viewer because, as Weissbourd (1985) indicates, children under the age of three have difficulty understanding the concept of make-believe. To these children, a person who is shot on television has actually been shot. Furthermore, Abelman and Sparks (1985) report that children under eight are frightened by animated monsters or ugly characters. However, children from eight to twelve are frightened by violence that could occur to humans. In either case these fears may cause nightmares or temporarily reduce social functioning.

Unfortunately, the portrayal of violence is not the only negative effect of television. Research by Neuman and Prowda

(1982) has found a significant negative correlation between reading achievement and television viewing in grades four, eight, and eleven. Mead, Searle, and Word (1985) state, in a report that discusses the 1979-80 National Assessment of Educational Progress, that for the 70,000 nine, thirteen, and seventeen year old students in the study, those who watched more than four hours of television per day possessed poorer reading skills than children who watched less than four hours per day. Furthermore, Comstock (1982) reports from a 1979-80 California study of over 500,000 sixth and twelfth grade students that the number of hours spent watching television was negatively related to reading, writing, and mathematics achievement.

Fetter (1984) pointed out that another California study of over 10,000 sixth graders indicated that televiewing of one to two hours per day does not hinder reading achievement; however reading achievement decreases as viewing time increases beyond two hours per day. Similar findings were reported in a literature review conducted by Williams, Haertel, Haertel, and Walberg (1982), who indicated that televiewing has a slight positive effect on school achievement up to ten hours per week. Conversely, more than ten hours per week has a negative effect. A 1984 report by the National Assessment of Educational Progress indicated that children who watch less than two hours of television per day and come from homes with readily available reading materials and have greater reading proficiency than students who watch more than six hours of television per day and come from homes without readily available reading material (Williams, 1986).

Williams also reports that televiewing displaces the time students should spend learning to read. Reading is hard work and requires practice but televiewing reduces this practice. Williams believes that this displacement is likely to permanently suppress scholastic achievement. Comstock and Juna (1987) support this belief by saying that there is a negative relationship between the amount of televiewing and scholastic achievement scores. Similarly, a recent Educational Testing Service international study found that in all five countries of the study the more time spent televiewing, the lower student achievement was in science and mathematics (Lawrence, 1989).

Another problem with frequent televiewing is its effect on the imagination. Both Singer and Singer (1979) and Winn (1977) have pointed out that the imagination is not stimulated when one watches television because it gives the viewer the images. Conversely, the process of reading requires the reader to create images from words, which improves imaginative abilities and creative writing ability. Thus an excessive amount of televiewing may limit a child's writing ability, which was verified by research conducted by Pierce (1983). Pierce also found that the writing ability of middle school students was negatively related to the amount of time spent watching television. For example, Joan Schloss, a fourth grade teacher in California, stated "When I was reading students' stories for a young author's project, I was shocked because the content was so violent. The stories reflected what children see on TV - monsters and killing. There was nothing creative or imaginative about them." (NEA Today, 1987)

Watching television not only affects reading achievement, imagination, and aggressiveness, but it takes time away from other important activities. Many teachers are concerned with the child who continually stays up late watching television and, as a result, is fatigued during school.

Other problems caused by frequent televiewing are those such as, less time spent working on homework, conversing with family members, engaging in athletic activities, playing, and reading for pleasure. For example, a study conducted at Tufts University indicated that our nation's young people became more obese from 1960 to 1980, and that one of the factors was excessive televiewing. (United Press International, 1987) Critics also point out that televiewing blocks communication, and that coviewing (parents with children) only creates an illusion that families spend time together. (Peters, et. al., 1988) According to Mcleod, Fitzpatrick, Glynn and Fallis (1982), parental viewing patterns are a reliable indicator of how much time a child will spend watching television.

It is interesting to note that televiewing may be somewhat of a comfort to latch-key children. When these children are home alone they feel lonely, and televiewing may reduce the child's fear and anxiousness (Gurney, 1988). However, a survey by Dewalt (1988) of 1200 students in grades 1-5 indicated that televiwing was picked by only 10% of the students when asked their favorite free-time activity. Bike riding was the top choice and was picked by 15% of the students as their favorite free time activity, while 67% of the choices involved outdoor play or playing with other children. Thus, televiewing may be a refuge for

latch-key children, but not necessarily a preferred chosen activity.

Method

The data for this study was collected using two forms developed by researchers at Susquehanna University. The first was an interest inventory containing six questions which was completed by elementary students. A copy of the instrument is located on page 23 of the appendix. Key questions of interest were: What is your favorite TV program? What is your favorite TV commercial? & What is your favorite thing to do in your free time after school or on weekends?

To determine the answers to these questions a stratified sample of elementary age children in Ohio, Pennsylvania, New Jersey, New York, South Carolina, and Virginia was selected. Teachers selected for the study were mailed a letter in early September requesting their assistance with the study. Researchers then mailed the interest inventories to the teachers who responded to the letter of interest in participation in the study, who administered the survey the week of November 14 and returned them to the researchers for analysis. The sample was composed of 1,416 children in grades one through six from 43 schools in 34 school districts. Twenty-eight percent of the students were from rural areas, 34% from small towns, 32% from suburban areas, and 7% from urban areas. The sample was composed of 53% males and 47% females with 92% of the students from public schools and 8% from private schools. As Table 1 indicates, minority students comprised 16% of the sample. A breakdown of the

grade level of the students in the sample is included in Table 2 and state of residence is listed in Table 3.

The second instrument, which was designed for this study, was used to record seven specific behaviors exhibited by characters on the favorite programs of students in the sample. The instrument was a sign system and as such it was a low-inference measure of certain behaviors which occurred; the observers did not judge behavior to be appropriate or inappropriate, but simply recorded the behaviors exhibited. The observers of television programs were trained in the use of the observation instrument and were given a set of definitions for each of the categories on the instrument. Observers were then assigned certain shows to watch. The observers recorded the number of times each of the following seven behaviors were exhibited in each episode:

(1)reading, (2)positive reference to religion, (3)cigarettes, (4)alcoholic drinks, (5)someone attacked, (6)people shot at (7)people killed. A copy of the observation instrument and definition of the behaviors is located in the Appendix. After collecting the instruments used to observe the television programs, the researchers computed the mean occurrence per hour of each of the seven behaviors. The television programs observed were taken from shows broadcast between November 17, and December 30, 1988.

Results

The responses to question 1, What is your favorite TV show? are displayed in Table 4. Alf and Cosby were the clear favorites of the children with Alf being selected by 15% of the children

and The Cosby Show being selected by 11% of the students. Fifteen percent of the students reported some type of cartoon as one of their favorite shows, and only ten students did not have a favorite television program (Table 5). These results closely match those of our 1986 and 1987 student surveys (Dewalt, 1987 & 1988). Students have consistently picked family type situation comedys as their favorite programs. The favorite prgorams in 1986 were in rank order, The Cosby Show, Alf, Family Ties and The A-Team, while Alf, The Cosby Show, Growing Pains, and Who's the Boss were the favorite programs in 1987.

The favorite television programs were collapsed into the 11 categories listed in Table 5. The favorite type of program was the current prime time series category with 51%. The category of cartoons were a distant second with only 15%.

Tables 6 and 7 illustrate the similarity and difference between males and females. The top rated show by males was Alf while females picked The Cosby Show. Duck Tales, a Disney cartoon, was the third choice of the males. Females did not select a cartoon as one of their top four choices.

Table 8 is a comparison of the male and female favorite programs in terms of category of program. While the rank order of choices is very similar, females tend to like current prime time programs more than males and prefer cartoons less than males.

The second key question of interest was: What is your favorite television commercial? The wide array of answers indicated very few specific commercials. In fact the only specific commercials picked by more than 2% of the children were

The California Raisins (Post) with 3.8% and Bud Light or Spuds McKenzie (3.2%). A content analysis of the student answers resulted in the categories listed in Table 9. It is very interesting to note that 5.6% of the students stated none and that another 3.8% left the item blank. The favorite commercials in terms of these categories were fast food or sugared products (17%), toys (15%) and commercials for upcoming television programs or movies (10%).

The third key question of interest was: What is your favorite free time activity? These results, which are listed in Table 10, indicated that 16% of the students liked playing the best. Bike riding was second with nine percent and playing with friends was third with eight percent. Watching television was the favorite free time activity of only 6.9% of the students. The same students also answered the question, What subject do you like best in school? The results displayed in Table 11 indicate that Math was clearly the favorite subject of the children in the sample (36%). Gym and science/health were their second and third choices.

The students were also asked to respond to the statement: I think writing is _____. Table 12 lists the responses in terms of 10 categories. The results indicate that 50% of the students surveyed thought writing was fun or interesting, while 16.5% thought it was great or exciting. Only 15% of the students thought writing was dumb or boring.

The second major component of the study was to observe the four television programs the students selected as their favorites. Each of these programs (Alf, The Cosby Show, Full

House & Growing Pains) were observed four times. Observers were asked to record each time the seven behaviors were exhibited. The mean occurrence per hour of each behavior is listed in Table 13. Of the behaviors observed, reading occurred 3.5 times per hour and positive references to religion occurred .1 times per hour. Drinking, smoking, and people being attacked, shot, or killed were not exhibited.

These findings are very similar to the 1987 data concerning the favorite programs of children. In that study Dewalt (1988) found that reading occurred at the rate of 7 times per hour. Drinking occurred .1 times per hour. Positive references to religion, smoking, and people being attacked shot or killed did not occur. Similar results were also found in our 1986 study (Dewalt, 1987). In 1986 reading occurred at the rate of 5.8 times per hour on the four favorite children's programs. Smoking occurred at the rate of .1 times per hour and drinking was exhibited .3 times per hour. People were shot .2 times per hour and attacked 2.5 times per hour. No one was killed.

Discussion

The results of this study and those of our 1986 and 1987 data indicate four important factors. Each of these factors provide insight into children's choices and implications for parents and teachers.

The first factor is that children like to watch situation comedies that involve families and children. We theorize that if networks geared programs only towards children that there would be many more situation comedies and less violent dramas. Many

backers of children's television have repeatedly requested that the networks provide more programs for children. This first factor adds another reason to their cause.

The second factor is that commercials are not something that children think of as being their favorite. Many children had no response to this question while the specific answers that we did get were usually less than 3% of the sample. We theorize that children are learning at an early age to tune out commercials. However it should be noted that 17% of the children listed some type of sugared product as their favorite commercial. The number of responses in this category give credence to those who would like to limit advertising during children's programming.

The third factor is that children pick mathematics as their favorite subject. We do not know the reason for this but theorize (1) that teachers may be making it interesting for the children, (2) that children like the fact that in mathematics there is usually one answer to a problem, (3) that the mathematics curriculum is easy until the middle school grades. Further research is needed to find out why children like mathematics as their favorite subject but score lower in mathematics achievement than their teenage peers in Ireland, Korea, Spain, England, and Canada (Lawrence, 1989).

The fourth factor is that children like to write. We believe that if teachers knew this that they would be more likely to use writing across the curriculum. Another question which comes to mind is at what age do children like to write the most and at what age does a decline in liking to write occur?

Our fifth factor is that while we are aware of the negative impact of television, televiewing in moderate doses will not hinder the academic growth of most children. We believe that parents can help their children to view television as just one of the many alternatives with which they can spend their time.

Taking the information from our review of literature and our 1988 data we believe that excessive televiewing by children is a problem in the United States. Because of this we believe that parents and educators must work together to make sure that televiewing does not take time away from other important activities such as playing, reading, conversing with family members, and homework. As Winn (1977) has indicated, families who have participated in research designed to assess the effects of no televiewing for certain lengths of time usually see an increase in reading and conversation between family members, which these families found encouraging. Unfortunately, when the study was concluded most families started watching television again; reading and family conversation returned to the pre-research level.

Parents who are interested in reducing excessive televiewing by their children should remember that if they want their children to watch less television they should provide or suggest something else for them to do. (Slavenas, 1987) For example, they should provide plenty of appropriate reading material for their children, take them to libraries so the children can select their own books, model good reading habits themselves, and read to their children every day. Tips for reducing time spent televiewing include:

1. Turn off the television when the program is finished.
2. Don't be afraid to say NO to certain programs or televising in general.
3. Set limits on number of programs per week and then work out a schedule of viewing with your children.
4. Reduce the number of televisions in use.
5. Gradually reduce your child's televising to one hour or less per school day.

Parents also need to assist their children in realizing that what they view on television may not be acceptable behavior in their home or neighborhood. As often as possible parents should view programs with their children and discuss the consequences of violence, fictional nature of the programs, and selling techniques used in commercials. (Fasarelli, 1984) In addition, parents may need to monitor television programs as done in this study, and then restrict their children's viewing to shows with acceptable patterns of behavior. As one Susquehanna University student stated "I wouldn't want my own children to grow up in this kind of [violent] atmosphere so why would I want them to watch TV when this atmosphere is so prevalent."

Parents concerned about the amount of television their children or family watch should read the books by Potter (1983), Charren and Hulsizer (1986), Winn (1977), or Coleman (1983) for suggestions to use TV viewing more effectively or reduce the time spent watching TV. Churches interested in the subject might order Television Awareness Training or Growing with Television to use in educational settings.

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Appendix

Table 1

Race of Students in the Sample

Race	Frequency	%
Asian	18	1.3
Black	187	13.2
Hispanic	21	1.5
White	1166	82.3
Blank	24	1.7

Table 2

Grade Levels of Students in the Sample

Grade	Frequency	%
1	3	.2
2	261	18.4
3	427	30.2
4	338	23.8
5	230	16.2
6	158	11.2

Table 3

State of Residence of Students in the Sample

State	Frequency	%
Ohio		
Pennsylvania	712	68%
New Jersey	17	2%
New York	22	2%
South Carolina	211	20%
Virginia	80	8%

Table 4

Favorite TV Programs of Students in the Sample

TV Program	Frequency	%
Alf	217	15
The Cosby Show	152	11
Full House	92	7
Growing Pains	64	5
Duck Tales	44	3
Fun House	43	3

Table 5

Favorite TV Programs by Category

Category	Frequency	%
Current Prime Time Series	724	51%
Cartoons	207	15%
Children's Programs	117	8%
Movies	93	7%
Old Series	92	7%
Sports	40	3%
Educational TV	28	2%
Game Show	28	2%
Music	20	1%
None	10	1%
Other	57	4%

Table 6

Favorite TV Programs of Male Students in the Sample

TV Program	Frequency	%
Alf	126	17
The Cosby Show	54	7
Duck Tales	26	4
Full House	24	3

Table 7

Favorite TV Shows of Female Students in the Sample

TV Program	Frequency	%
The Cosby Show	98	15
ALF	91	14
Full House	68	10
Growing Pains	45	7

Table 8

Comparison of Favorite TV Shows by Category for Males and Females

Category	% Males	% Females
Current Prime Time Series	44	60
Cartoons	17	11
Children's Programs	5	8
Movies	8	5
Old Series	7	6
Sports	3	1
Educational TV	1	2
Game Show	1	2
Music	1	1
None	2	3
Other	2	3

Table 9

Favorite Commercials by Category

Category	Frequency	%
Fast food or sugared products	238	17
Toys	215	15
TV programs or movies	184	13
Other food	142	10
Blank or none	132	10
Personal hygiene	105	7
Dog or cat food	93	7
Cars or trucks	87	6
Beer	70	5
Educational	43	3
Other	107	7

Table 10

Favorite Free Time Activity of Students in the Sample

Activity	Frequency	%
Playing	229	16.2
Bike riding	127	9.0
Playing with friends	117	8.3
Football	103	7.3
Watch TV	98	6.9
Reading	93	6.6
Visiting relatives	76	5.4
Play video games	63	4.4
Shopping	50	3.5
Drawing	39	2.8
Ride ATV/motorcycle	33	2.3
Baseball	28	2.0
Soccer	13	1.8
Skateboarding	13	1.8
Swimming	13	1.8
Other sports	41	2.9
Music/Dance	17	1.2
Help Parents	11	0.8

Table 11

Favorite Subject of Children in the Sample

Subject	Frequency	%
Math	513	36
Gym	179	13
Science/Health	166	12
Spelling	138	10
Reading	126	9
Art	97	7
Social Studies	53	4
Handwriting	42	3
English	41	3
Music	29	2
Blank	28	2
Recess	3	<1

Table 12

Students Response to the Question: I think writing is . . .

Category	Frequency	%
Great or exciting	233	16.5
Fun or easy	709	50.1
Fun because you learn	28	2.0
Fun because you can imagine or make your own story	73	5.2
Interesting	34	2.4
Sometimes fun sometimes not fun	60	4.2
Depends on assignment	11	0.8
Hard	45	3.2
Not fun, boring	168	11.9
I hate it, dumb	45	3.2

Table 13

Mean Occurrence of Each Behavior per Hour on Television Programs
the Students Selected as Their Favorite

Behavior	Mean
Reading	3.5
Religion	.1
Cigarettes Smoked	0
Alcoholic Drinks	0
People Attacked	0
People Shot	0
People Killed	0

Childrens' Favorites = Alf, The Cosby Show, Growing Pains &
 Full House.

Copy of interest questionnaire completed by sample of students

1988 Interest Questionnaire

Grade: _____ Race: _____ Boy _____ Girl _____

1. What subject do you like best in school? _____

2. What is your favorite book?

3. What is your favorite TV program?

4. What is your favorite TV commercial?

5. What is your favorite thing to do in your free time after school or on weekends?

6. I think writing stories is _____

Copy of recording instrument used by observers

Susquehanna University 1988 TV Study

Program: _____ Date: _____
Viewer: _____ Time: _____

times someone read: _____
references to religion: _____

cigarettes: _____
alcoholic drinks: _____

times someone attacked: _____
people shot: _____
people killed: _____

Comments:

Copy of definitions used for this study

Definition for the study

- 1.read: anytime someone reads a newspaper, book, magazine, letter, sign, computer terminal, etc.
- 2.religion: anytime someone (in a positive manner) attends religious services, talks about attending, talks about a belief in God or a Supreme Being, prays, or reads a religious book. This would include any religion.
- 3.attacked: anytime someone touches or attempts to touch someone in order to inflict bodily harm.
- 4.shot: anytime someone is shot or shot at with a gun

General Directions:

You will record events of each scene only once. For example, if John is reading at a computer terminal you would indicate this by placing one slash in the # times someone read category. If in a later scene, John is again working at a computer terminal you would record this in the same way as above. Thus you would have two slashes in the # times someone read category. If Sam is shot and killed you would record one slash in the # people shot category and one slash in the # people killed category. Use the comment section to explain any unusual situations or themes. For example, it would be significant to note that "Cheers" takes place in a bar.